

CONVERGE COVID-19 Working Groups for Public Health and Social Sciences Research

Research Agenda-Setting Paper

This paper was written to help advance convergence-oriented research in the hazards and disaster field. It highlights areas where additional research could contribute new knowledge to the response to and recovery from the pandemic and other disasters yet to come. Questions about the research topics and ethical and methodological issues highlighted here should be directed to the authors who contributed to this paper.

Working Group Name:

Higher Education and Community Grief, Bereavement, and Loss in COVID-19

Working Group Description:

This Working Group will focus on the multiple ways that institutions of higher education can engage with the increasingly pressing needs of bereavement, loss, and grieving in the context of COVID-19 and its enduring impacts on communities.

Overview:

Institutions of higher education have a critical role to play in the cascade of grief, mourning, and bereavement unfolding with the Covid-19 pandemic. In this research agenda-setting paper, we point to key roles that colleges and universities can play in COVID-19 grieving, thereby highlighting possibilities for collective and creative (rather than merely restorative) forms of grieving. This also recognizes the ways losses associated with COVID-19 intersect and compound with other injurious processes (institutional racism, for example). We place a high priority on research that is actionable, while at the same time drawing from transdisciplinary theoretical frameworks. Importantly, many in our Working Group see both kinds of research as inextricably connected to teaching and higher education institutions as having important roles to play beyond their campuses. Our Working Group is functionally diverse, including cultural anthropologists and social work researchers, many with sustained research experience focused on youth and mental health. Together, we identified research questions to be addressed and possibilities for both pedagogical and community programs.

We approached our work recognizing that the COVID-19 pandemic is not occurring in isolation, and that related losses are diverse, multiple, cascading, and systemic—affecting individuals, communities, and entire generations. We define cascading losses as involving pervasive losses on multiple levels, where nearly everyone within a “system” is experiencing some form of loss. Further, cascading losses produce multiple forms of grief; Death, loss of jobs and a sense of security, and depressed futures are experienced in different ways. This points to a need for on-going research to understand the losses being experienced, how they are being understood by differently positioned people, and the adequacy of responsive programs. It also points to the potential of both participatory action and community-based research approaches (Cargo et al. 2008; Lykes and Scheib 2016; Brydon-Miller, Greenwood, and Maguire 2003; Greenwood 2016). This approach

would combine research, teaching, institutional connections, and theory generation in ways that educate and build networks of resilience and transformation.

In what follows, we briefly describe the motivations guiding our current and proposed work, a research agenda, ideas for pedagogical programs, and ideas for building institutional connections between higher education institutions and the diverse communities they should relate to.

Motivations: Politics of Grief, Bereavement, and Loss

If we lived in a world where one could isolate specific instances of loss from other simultaneously occurring events, then the task of researchers, students, community organizations, and service providers would be simple. Instead, we inhabit a world where losses are interconnected, where it is frequently impossible to disentangle the emotional impacts of a death of a loved one from larger political events, where losses cascade and amplify beyond the realm of an individual psyche. For example, recent high-profile cases of violence against African Americans are part of the long history of racialized violence in the United States. They have now, at this historical moment, become intertwined with the pandemic, responses to it, and the ways in which the disproportionate number of deaths born by low-income people of color painfully illuminate ongoing collective losses. Communal responses to COVID-19, then, must meaningfully engage how politics are intertwined with loss. Importantly, researchers can provide both resources and new knowledge about what might help support the complex and different ways which people find support, allowing for (and possibly inviting) projects of collective reconstruction and re-envisioning of community life.

Research

As communities struggle to come to terms with the cascading impacts of death, illness, unemployment, social isolation, and for some a loss of a sense of security, community based research, participatory research and other forms of engaged scholarship have a critical role to play. Such partnerships can support systematic unpacking of the many ways these problems come to exist, and in so doing, can help support community, institutional, and political solutions. It is true that mechanisms for non-academic communities to access research resources are formalized in some institutions (Butin 2010; Cargo et al. 2008; Greenwood 2016). However, universities predominantly present an opaque façade for those who don't have academic credentials. How for example, might a community find answers to questions about community grief and healing that require the resources of research? While not without their own challenges, community engaged learning provides some key guiding examples (Wexler 2011; Fortun n.d.) that can be used to navigate out of this current, unsettling moment.

Priority Research Topics and Specific Research Questions:

Priority Research Topics	Potential Research Questions
COVID-19 loss and bereavement among higher education students	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• How are higher education students experiencing COVID-19 and associated stresses and harms?• How are higher education students expressing and responding to COVID-19 and associated stresses and harms? Where and how are they finding solace?• How are higher education students a vulnerable community in the COVID-19 pandemic? What analytic purchase is gained by conceptualizing higher education students in their terms?

Youth bereavement and mental health in comparative perspective	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What insight on youth bereavement and mental health in the COVID-19 pandemic can be gained from scholarly literature in anthropology, social work, disaster studies, and kindred fields? • How is systematic, cascading loss best conceptualized? What scholarly literature can contribute to this?
Pedagogies that support students experiencing cascading, systemic loss	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What insights from research on education amidst trauma can inform pedagogy within COVID-19? • How can insight from the radical pedagogy movement (associated with Paulo Friere, Miles Horton, and kindred figures) inform COVID-19 pedagogy? • What forms of pedagogy give students a sense of efficacy, helping offset experiences of loss? • How can student assignments be designed to support “rebellious mourning”?
Higher education-community partnerships in times of loss, and grief	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How can past and existing programming to support communities facing systemic loss inform response to COVID-19? • What kinds of partnerships between higher education institutions and communities enable effective, reflexively sharing of expertise and resources?
Higher education in and after the COVID-19 pandemic	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How has the COVID-19 pandemic changed conditions of possibility for higher education institutions and students in different settings? • In the wake of COVID-19, how can and should higher education be conceptualized and reorganized? What kinds of education are called for in the wake of the pandemic

Pedagogy:

Classroom-based curriculum that engages the current crisis provides a key arena for both the production of knowledge and the creation of institutional linkages that support communities and organizations (Brydon-Miller, Greenwood, and Maguire 2003; Greenwood 2016; Berg, Coman, and Schensul 2009; Cargo et al. 2008; Lykes and Scheib 2016). Pedagogies that animate a sense of student efficacy, through increasing understanding of themselves as civic/political actors in the context of the pandemic are in themselves a way of collectively “working through” (Lear 2007) grief. We feel that this is a core component of building what some call resilience (Adger 2000), and others call resourcefulness (MacKinnon and Derickson 2013) in the context of indigenous studies.

This moment of collective grief gives us all the opportunity to create new spaces for learning and acting—reimagining futures. What can academics bring to this particular moment? There is a pressing need to research the impact of such collective and individual pedagogical work and also build on existing examples.

Further, one of the ongoing challenges in the literature on community-based learning focuses on the mismatch between the needs of the academic—the constraints of scheduling, grades, logistics, assessment—and needs of community organizations. As a generator and amplifier of knowledge, the university has a vital role to play in crafting thoughtful, new avenues for reimagining justice and engaging its communities (broadly understood). This work must be done in partnership that includes power sharing with other institutions and collectivities. If ever there was a time to rethink how the academy interacts with surrounding communities, it is now (Berg, Coman, and Schensul 2009). The wealth of research and education resources could play a vital role for stressed communities in both understanding needs and providing needed support. At the same time, these relationships and experiences will help to educate a generation of students who have intensive training on urgent needs, combining theory and practice, in natural and social sciences, fostering the capacities to address both pressing current needs and future directions. This is an opportunity to put transdisciplinary efforts to work on behalf of communities who are suffering acutely now as a consequence

of historic and systematic discrimination, marginalization, disinvestment, and inequitable distribution of wealth. Moving in the direction would create a context where public mourning becomes “less a means of getting past or moving on from traumatic experiences than as an ongoing democratic labor of recognition and repair” (McIvor xii, 2016).

Institutional Linkages:

While institutions of higher education have been justly criticized for exploiting communities, there are many examples of partnerships that have been critical for community organizations, non-profits, and social movements. These partnerships may provide space for meetings, access to occasional funding, as well as access to resources such as computers, copy machines, Internet, and other technology. Long term collaborations can also focus on providing support for helping to deal with loss, mourning and bereavement on many levels. Outcomes and experiences resulting from these partnerships look differently for various communities. For example, communities with massive job loss may require a combination of education related to employment and psychosocial support. What kinds of lay mental health/community support models would be useful? What kinds of differences in cultural need can be realized? How can research inform efforts to address health needs, issues of inequality, environmental justice, and community education? Given this variability, how can institutions of higher education play a useful role? What does the literature tell us?

Going back to the work of John Dewey, there has been a call for educational institutions to be critical community actors and respond to pressing needs. Universities have frequently been described as anchor institutions (Goddard et al. 2014). In other words, they have the potential to provide ballast, particularly during times of widespread grief, loss, and mourning. There is much to be gained by combining classroom pedagogy with research, in hopes of determining how institutions have and can collaborate to support the needs of communities facing cascading losses. The current moment also calls for an imaginative rethinking of historical roles and a democratizing of learning processes within university settings. The question remains: how can institutions of higher education be more responsive to communities beyond their gates and become forces for transformation, for envisioning and enacting just societies, rather than serving as engines of reproducing the status quo. This work is interwoven with collective issues of grief, mourning, and loss. The collective capacity to aspire (Appadurai 2006) to a different kind of world has within it the seeds of working through to determine, for ourselves, our collective future.

Rebellious mourning (Milstein 2017), channeling loss into projects of communality, and remaking worlds are also essential research avenues. What forms of communality, what kinds of new forms of solidarity, and in what ways does grief, loss, and mourning allow for different forms of kinship across communities? How does historical precedence inform us? More than ever, institutions of higher education, themselves implicated in their own mourning and grief, have multiple roles to play for envisioning and transforming our world. Grief, loss, and mourning require both psychological, imaginative, and material resources. As scholar/activist Grace Boggs writes, “We urgently need to bring to our communities the limitless capacity to love, serve, and create for and with each other. We urgently need to bring the neighbor back into our hoods, not only in our inner cities but also in our suburbs, our gated communities, on Main Street and Wall Street, and on Ivy League campuses” (Boggs and Kurashige 2012: 47).

Ethical / Methodological Considerations:

We draw attention to the need for re-envisioning the relationships between teaching, the production of knowledge (research), communities, institutions of higher education, and politics in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Such a transformation requires nuanced reworking of how we operate in regards to the classroom, to funding, and to our commitments to those outside the academy with pressing needs. This is a

fundamental intertwining issue of ethics and methodology. By politics, we mean the ways in which institutions of higher education are situated in relationship to larger structural dynamics of inequality, racism, and relatedly, the climate crisis and its responses (Moses and Whitley). While this agenda-setting paper focuses on COVID-19 responses, one cannot see this pandemic in isolation from ongoing social fissures that have a determining impact on who suffers the most. Through research, teaching, and collaborating, higher education is uniquely situated to both bring light to and address these issues in meaningful ways.

Contributors:

Joshua Moses, Departments of Anthropology/Department of Environmental Studies, Haverford College
Mayce Van, Department of Anthropology, Haverford College
Lisa Wexler, Department of Social Work, University of Michigan
Kim Fortun, Department of Anthropology, University of California Irvine
Nathan Wood, Information Quality Lab, iSchool, University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign

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